

04 Verbal Communication

A man walked into a bar. A second man walked into a bar. A third one didn't . . . because he ducked. You know the word *bar*, and you most likely know that in some cultures jokes and stories often start with the phrase “A man walked into a bar.” Such cultural knowledge frames expectations about the story being told. A *frame*, you recall from Chapter 1, is a context that influences the interpretation of communication. However, the word *bar* has different meanings. If you were faintly amused by the opening sentences here, it is partly because the word is used in the first sentence differently than you expected on the basis of the frame of the story. The punch line works only because you are misled—twice—into thinking of a different kind of “bar.” Familiarity with the story’s cultural form frames your expectations in a way that pulls the last sentence right out from under you. Language has a grammatical structure, but when used conversationally, it uses cultural and relational assumptions.

Verbal communication involves the *use* of language. Notice that the word *use* is emphasized in this definition. When discussing verbal communication, communication scholars do not simply look at language but rather explore the ways in which it is used when interacting with others. *Language* is just a collection of symbols that can be arranged in a particular order according to a particular grammar. Remember, though, that symbols themselves have no meaning. Words, like all symbols, are given meaning when they are put into use. Within this chapter, we explore the ways in which language is put into use.

This chapter is structured somewhat differently than others within this book. In exploring verbal communication, we will essentially be following the characteristics of communication discussed in Chapter 1. Accordingly, we will talk about how verbal communication is symbolic, involves meaning, is relational, is cultural, involves frames, is presentational, and is transactive. Doing so will reinforce those characteristics for when they are not explicitly addressed but still involved when discussing other types of communication. The application of those characteristics when discussing verbal communication will also provide a clear understanding of verbal communication in everyday life.

How Is Verbal Communication Symbolic?

The answer to the opening question is pretty obvious if you have already read the introductory paragraphs of this chapter. If you have not read them, why are you starting here? Go read them, and we will wait. . . . All right, the answer is: Verbal communication involves the use of language, which is made up of symbols.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- 1 How is verbal communication symbolic?
- 2 How does verbal communication involve meaning?
- 3 How is verbal communication relational?
- 4 How is verbal communication cultural?
- 5 What frames your understanding of verbal communication?
- 6 What is the presentational nature of verbal communication?
- 7 What are the functions of verbal communication?

verbal communication: the use of language



Why might this pairing of street signs be amusing to a citizen in the United States, and what is taken for granted by those who understand the joke?

The meaning the parents applied to the symbol *dog* did not fully correspond with the meaning the children intended when using that symbol.

We will talk more about meaning in the next section, but for now notice the use of *applied* in the last paragraph. It is not that words *have* meanings but that meanings *are applied to* words. Symbols have no inherent meaning. They are given meaning along with value and power when they are used during interactions among people.

This fact does not mean that studying language is meaningless—many of our linguist friends would certainly take issue with that notion. However, as much as your authors enjoy learning new words and studying the development of languages, we find the actual use of words more interesting. It is through the actual use of language that meanings develop. Moreover, it is through the use of language, along with other symbolic activity, that relationships, identities, cultures, and realities are transacted. Now that is really fascinating!

Verbal Communication Involves Meaning

So, we know that verbal communication is symbolic and that meanings are established through its use. And, later in this chapter, we explore how people go about assigning meanings using a communication frame. Before tackling that issue, though, we need to examine what *meaning* actually means. Words are given the following two types of meaning:



By the way...

Taa

Of the thousands of languages worldwide, the most complicated may be Taa, which is primarily spoken in Botswana. It has 112 distinct sounds, more than any other language. (For comparison, English has around 45 sounds, depending on the dialect.) Making Taa particularly complicated, the majority of the words start with one of 83 sorts of clicks.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. If you speak more than one language, what does that tell you about the arbitrary nature of symbols?
2. If you only speak one language, do you think this makes the arbitrary nature of symbols more difficult to grasp?

denotative and connotative. Taking things one step further, words are also given value based on the meanings applied.

Denotative and Connotative Meanings

Words, as with all symbols, can be given multiple meanings depending on how they are used and the circumstances surrounding their use (Ogden & Richards, 1946).

Polysemy is the term used to recognize that there can be multiple meanings given to the same word. If all symbols can have several different meanings, then each time you speak or hear a word, you must determine which meaning applies.

Denotative meaning is the general meaning of a word. It is the meaning or meanings appearing next to each word in the dictionary. (*Dictionary* and *denotative* both obviously start with the same letter, if you need help remembering the term on an examination.) If you point at a cat and say, “Cat,” everyone will know that the sound denotes the object that is furry and whiskered and currently sleeping on your keyboard as you read this book.

Denoting the same object or idea by the same words is an obviously fundamental requirement for communicating. Conversation works only when people can assume that they share the world by using the same words to denote items. Remember, there is never complete agreement by individuals on the meanings of any word, but there is often at least some overlap of meanings. The polysemic nature of words can make determining intended meaning a challenging task, though.

Connotative meaning refers to the overtones and implications associated with a word or an object. For example, cats are seen as independent, cuddly, hunters, companions, irritations, allergens, stalkers, stealthy, and incredibly lucky both in landing on their feet all the time and in having nine lives. If you talk about a friend as a “pussycat,” you are most likely referring to the connotative meaning and implying that he is soft and cuddly and perhaps stealthy, companionable, and lucky. You are unlikely to be referring to the denotative meaning and warning people that he or she is actually, secretly a cat and has fur and sleeps on keyboards.

Since connoting involves the implications of a word, some words carry baggage that can elicit an emotional response. Consider, for instance, the different emotions stirred up by the words *patriot* and *traitor*. The first connotes many good feelings of loyalty, duty, and faithfulness. The second connotes bad qualities like deceit, two-facedness, untrustworthiness, and disloyalty. These connotations are



What factors might be influencing the conversation of these two people?

DISCIPLINARY DEBATE

Language and Perception

Developed from the writings of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf (Sapir, 1949; Whorf, 1956), the **Sapir-Whorf hypothesis** proposes that “you think what you can say.” In other words, the names that make verbal distinctions also help you make conceptual distinctions rather than the other way around. Essentially, the language you speak impacts how you view the world. Other scholars oppose this notion of linguistic relativism and might ask the first question as follows.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. English speakers have a word for the front of the hand (*palm*), but no single word for the back. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, does this mean that English speakers should not be able to tell the difference?
2. To what extent do you believe language shapes how people view the world?

polysemy: the fact that multiple meanings can be associated with a given word or symbol rather than just one unambiguous meaning

denotative meaning: the identification of something by pointing it out (“that is a cat”)

Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: the idea that it is the names of objects and ideas that make verbal distinctions and help you make conceptual distinctions rather than the other way around

connotative meaning: the overtones, implications, or additional meanings associated with a word or an object

By the way...



Hello, Officer Fife

Media references are often used in conversations because of associated connotative meanings (McMahan, 2004). For instance, a police officer

might be called “Barney Fife” or “Chief Wiggum,” characters from *The Andy Griffith Show* and *The Simpsons*, respectively, to highlight cowardice or ineffectiveness.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Think about some of the conversations you have recently had during which media references were used. Why do you suppose they are effective when used in conversations?
2. Do you use media references more with some people than with other people?

extra layers of meaning atop the denotation of a person as one kind of citizen or the other.

Words carry strong and varying connotations in particular cultures (Jiqun, 2012) and within particular relationships. As a result, your ability to understand someone improves as you know more about the associations he or she makes to certain words, either culturally or personally.

Words and Values

As a result of their denotative and connotative meanings, words are generally given particular values in a society. Like meanings the values associated with words have developed over time and are reinforced and socially constructed. Consider the characteristics of values encoded through words in Table 4.1.

God Terms and Devil Terms

Recognizing that words and all symbols are given value within societies, communication philosopher Kenneth Burke (1966) made a distinction between God terms and Devil terms. **God terms** are powerful terms that are viewed positively in a society. **Devil terms** are equally powerful terms that are viewed negatively in a society. In the United States, such a term as *freedom* may be considered a God term, while such a term as *al-Qaeda* may be considered a Devil term. (See Table 4.2 for some other examples.) However, God and Devil terms are not absolutes for everyone in the same society. Depending on your political point of view, for example, such words as *Bush* or *Clinton* or *Obama* may be one or the other. Furthermore, societal views of God or Devil terms may change with the passing of time. Within the United States, for example, *democracy* has been viewed as both (Engels, 2011).

Table 4.1 Values Encoded Through Words

Values encoded through words can be positive or negative.

Communication studies would naturally be positive, while *terrorism* would likely be negative.

Values encoded through words can be shared by individuals.

If you tell your instructor, “I deserved a B on this paper, but you gave me a C+,” both you and the instructor recognize that a B is “better than” a C+ in the framework of meaning related to grades.

Values encoded through words can differ among people.

People may react differently to the words *Republican*, *Democrat*, *conservative*, *liberal*, *capitalism*, and *socialism*.

Values encoded through words can change over time.

The word *nice* generally has a positive association now. However, it was originally used when referring to someone as ignorant, having been derived from the Latin word for ignorant, *nescius*.

God terms: powerfully evocative terms that are viewed positively in a society (contrast with *Devil terms*)

Devil terms: powerfully evocative terms viewed negatively in a society (contrast with *God terms*)

Table 4.2 God and Devil Terms

God terms in the United States	Liberty, Justice, Equality, American Dream
Devil terms in the United States	Communism, Torture, Prejudice, King George III

God and Devil terms also exist in personal relationships. For instance, one partner may know what topics should not be mentioned around the other partner—his or her Devil terms. On the other hand, certain terms might be so unquestionably revered by a partner that their use can always bring about a positive reaction. Consider how a society's God and Devil terms are also reinforced through relationships. Sometimes a partner may act on behalf of society by saying, "Oh! You shouldn't say such things!" In such a statement, he or she is reinforcing, and reminding the other person of, the norms of society and its God and Devil terms.

Verbal Communication Is Relational

Verbal communication is also relational. Accordingly, verbal communication influences relationships, and relationships influence verbal communication. Whenever you communicate verbally, a particular relationship is presumed with another person, the members of a group, or an audience. Another way of thinking about this is that when you are verbally communicating, you are also relating.

Verbal Communication Transacts Relationships

As we will maintain later in the chapter and again on the chapter dedicated to personal relationships, it is through verbal communication and other symbolic activity that relationships are developed and maintained. They are symbolic creations, literally talked into existence. That statement may be difficult to wrap your head around at this point, but it will become clearer after we cover that idea later on.

Relationships Regulate Verbal Communication

Relationships influence the meanings that are given to words and the words that are actually used. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the words "I love you" have different meanings attached depending on the relationship in which they are spoken. Saying those words to a romantic partner would mean something different than saying those words to a friend. Moreover, relationships influence what words are uttered in the first place. Regardless of great customer service, you would not expect a checkout person at a grocery store to say that to you as a customer.

Here as well, we see relationships being created through verbal communication. The very fact that you would or would not say something reinforces the existence of a particular relationship! With friends, for example, we draw on words differently than we do in work relationships, family relationships, and school relationships. Specific relationships are also reinforced through the meanings and intentions we assign to the words of others. Kirkpatrick, Duck, and Foley (2006) noted that enemies do not trust each other to mean what they say, each suspecting the other's words to be a lie or a misdirection.

Make your case



God Term or Devil Term?

People can assign different values to any particular word. What is a God term to one person may be a Devil term to another.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Which of the words below would you consider God terms, and why?
2. Which would you consider Devil terms, and why?

Abortion	Facebook
Banker	Natural
C (course grade)	Politician
Cigarettes	Raw Food
Exercise	Twitter



COMMUNICATION + YOU

Talking With Your Friends



You and your friends probably have several examples of shorthand words and phrases for reminding one another of events, feelings, or people who populate your relational history. You may also have special nicknames for people known only to you and your partner or close friends.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What are some examples of these words, phrases, and names, and what do they tell you about your relationships?
2. Have you ever been the “out-of-towner” in a group of friends, where you did not understand shorthand words or phrases and needed them to be explained to you?

Relationships and Shared Meanings

We can take the relational nature of verbal communication a bit deeper, by looking at the creation and recognition of shared meanings. The more personal your relationship is with someone, the better you can understand his or her intentions and meanings. Part of becoming closer to other people is learning how they tick—an informal way of saying that you understand their worlds of meaning. When you know people better, you also know better than strangers what they mean when they make certain comments.

Relationships are transacted in part through shared meanings and patterns of communi-

cation. In other words, the understandings shared by you and a friend represent not only common understanding but also your relationship. No one else shares the exact understandings, common history, experiences, knowledge of the same people, or assumptions that you take for granted in that relationship. When you talk to people, you use words that refer to your shared history and common understandings that represent your relationship. Relationships presume common, shared knowledge.

Think for a minute about what happens when a friend from out of town comes to visit, and you go out with your in-town friends. You probably notice that the conversation is a bit more awkward. You are required to do more explaining. For example, instead of saying, “Landan, how was the hot date?” and waiting for an answer, you must throw in a conversational bracket that helps your friend from out of town understand the question. You may say, “Landan, how was the hot date?” and follow it with an aside comment to the out-of-towner (“Landan has this hot new love interest he has a *real* crush on, and they finally went out last night”).

Conversational Hypertext

Talk among people who share a personal relationship is characterized by a great deal of conversational hypertext (Duck, 2002). The term **conversational hypertext** refers to coded messages within conversation that an informed listener will effortlessly understand.

You know what hypertext is from your use of the Internet, and how you talk to people works the same way. In conversation, people often use a word that suggests more about a topic and would therefore show up on a computer screen in blue, pointing you to a hyperlink. For example, you might say, “I was reading Duck and McMahan, and I learned that there are many more extra messages that friends pick up in talk than I had realized before.” This sentence makes perfect sense to somebody who knows what a “Duck and McMahan” is, but others may not understand. On a computer, they would use their mouse to find out more by clicking on Duck and McMahan and being taken to

conversational hypertext: coded messages within conversation that an informed listener will effortlessly understand

edge.sagepub.com/duckciel2e. In a conversation, they would “click” on the hypertext by asking a direct question: “What’s a Duck and McMahan?”

In relationships, shared meanings and overlaps of perceptions make communication special and closer. You and your friends talk in coded, hypertextual language all the time and probably do not even recognize when you are doing it, because it seems so natural in your personal relationship. Only when you encounter someone who does not understand the code, such as the out-of-town friend in the example above, do you probably recognize the hypertext and realize that it needs to be unpacked, expanded, or addressed directly for the out-of-towner.

Verbal Communication Is Cultural

Verbal communication is also cultural, much in the way that it is relational. Accordingly, verbal communication influences culture, and culture influences verbal communication. Whenever you communicate verbally, cultural assumptions are presumed involving appropriateness and meanings within a given society or group.

When discussing culture, we are not just talking about such nation-states as the United States and China. Also included in discussions of culture are any groups of people who share distinct meanings and styles of speaking. Embedded within these distinct meanings and styles of communication are the values and beliefs of those cultural groups.

Multiple cultural groups exist within larger nation-states, and as a result you likely belong to many of them. They might include cultural groups involving your life on campus, at work, and within your community.

Verbal Communication Transacts Cultures

It is through verbal communication and other symbolic activity in which cultures are developed and maintained. Like relationships, cultures are symbolic creations. Cultural groups are distinct and brought into being because of the way in which their members communicate. We talk more about this idea in Chapter 12, but in the meantime, consider the fundamental role that relationships play in this process. It is through our relationships that we come to understand cultural ways of communicating. You have learned culturally appropriate ways of talking through interactions with family, friends, neighbors, classmates, coworkers, and even the person at a fast-food drive-through.

Cultures Regulate Verbal Communication

Cultures influence the meanings that are given to words and the words that are actually used. Some cultural groups curse more than others, for instance. You are so good at communicating culturally and are so skilled at moving seamlessly in and out of various groups that you may not even recognize that you are doing it. Aware or not, you communicate in unique ways when among members of different cultural groups because of the meaning systems and norms of those groups.



By the way...

Speaking and Social Class

Somewhat connected to our discussion here, Basil Bernstein (1971) made a distinction between restricted codes and elaborated codes.

Restricted code leaves a great deal unsaid, with the assumption being that other people will understand because of shared connections and accompanying shared knowledge.

Elaborated code leaves very little unsaid, with the assumption being that people would not be able to understand otherwise. Examining class differences and education, Bernstein maintained working-class children struggled because they communicated in a restricted code, while middle-class children succeeded because they were able to communicate using both codes.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you believe class distinctions of this sort exist today?
2. If so, are they still transacted in part through restricted and elaborated codes?

restricted code: a way of speaking that emphasizes authority and adopts certain community/cultural orientations as indisputable facts (contrast with *elaborated code*)

elaborated code: speech that emphasizes the reasoning behind a command; uses speech and language more as a way for people to differentiate the uniqueness of their own personalities and ideas and to express their own individuality, purposes, attitudes, and beliefs than as a way to reinforce collectivity or commonality of outlook (contrast with *restricted code*)

ETHICAL ISSUE

Note how sexist, racist, and heteronormative language is both relational and cultural and always places one group of people in an inferior position relative to another group of people. Is it ever ethical to use this kind of language?

feminine talk: that which is characterized as nurturing, harmonious, and compromising (contrast with *masculine talk*)

masculine talk: that which is characterized as tough, aggressive, and competitive (contrast with *feminine talk*)

high-context talk: that which is characterized as relying on the context in which it takes place, with words used sparingly and the relationship shared by interactants being extremely important (contrast with *low-context talk*)

low-context talk: that which is characterized as straightforward, with the message speaking for itself and relationship separated from the message as much as possible (contrast with *high-context talk*)

collectivist talk: that which is characterized as stressing group benefit and harmony rather than personal needs and advancement (contrast with *individualist talk*)

individualist talk: that which is characterized as stressing individual needs and achievement (contrast with *collectivist talk*)

For instance, you would likely talk in distinct ways when interacting within on-campus culture and work culture. Here, like relationships, cultures are being created through verbal communication, since the fact that you would or would not say something reinforces those cultures.

Cultural Ways of Talking

To understand the nuances involved in talking culturally, we can examine categories of cultural talk. These styles of cultural talk are usually applied to nation-states, and we take issue with such broad characterizations in Chapter 12, but they will illustrate our point here. These styles of talk have unique meaning systems, values, and styles. Table 4.3 provides definitions and examples of talk attempting to get someone to finish a project at work.

Table 4.3 Cultural Styles of Talk

Feminine and Masculine

Feminine talk is nurturing, harmonious, and compromising (Arrindell et al., 2013).

I hope you can finish this project soon and am certain you will do a good job. Let me know if you need any additional assistance.

Masculine talk is tough, aggressive, and competitive (Arrindell et al., 2013).

If you cannot complete this project now, I will replace you with someone who can.

High-Context and Low-Context

High-context talk relies heavily on the context in which it takes place. Words are used sparingly with a great deal left unsaid. Relationships among people are extremely important (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2010). In the following example, the cultural implications of friendship (which would probably entail prompt work) are used to get the person to complete the project.

It is good to have a friend working on this project.

Low-context talk is straightforward, and the message itself says everything. Relationships are separated from the message as much as possible (Samovar et al. 2010).

This project needs to be completed soon, because it is behind schedule and completing it after the deadline will be harmful for you, me, and everyone in this company.

Collectivist and Individualist

Collectivist talk stresses group benefit and harmony rather than personal needs and advancement (Du & King, 2013; Gudykunst, 2000; Morsbach, 2004).

Completing this project soon will benefit the team a great deal.

Individualist talk stresses individual needs and achievement (Du & King, 2013; Gudykunst, 2000; Morsbach, 2004).

Completing this project soon would look good on your yearly evaluation.

Verbal Communication and Frames

Frames assist people in making sense of communication by drawing attention to how they should be communicating, how they might expect others to communicate, and how they should assign meanings to symbols being used. Conversational frames are used to make sense of and assign meaning to verbal communication.

You are better able to communicate with another person when both of you recognize that frames are shared. Sometimes these frames are assumed. At other times, frames are signaled by means of various relational, cultural, and personal cues. For example, saying “Let’s not be so formal” is a direct way of saying that you are in the “friendly frame.” Saying “Take a seat and make yourself comfortable” is more indirect but has the same effect.

Of course, difficulties may arise if people are using different frames of understanding. Different frames may be used unknowingly. Different frames could be used purposefully, especially if people do not perceive the situation or their relationships in the same way.



The woman on the left is telling her friends how the chaos around her house prevents her from ever having any time to herself. The friend in the center is providing assurances that her concerns are warranted and that she is a valuable person. The friend on the right is getting ready to tell her to stop complaining and get over herself. Which cultural styles of talk are these friends demonstrating?

Recognizing Frames

A number of types of conversational frames may be applied when interacting with others. As just discussed in the preceding sections, relationships and cultures influence how verbal communication is used and what it means. Accordingly, your understanding of relationships and cultures enables you to use them as frames when assigning meaning to verbal communication. The physical location can also be used when assigning meaning, such as when you engage in “restaurant talk” rather than “classroom talk” by asking your instructor a question about course content rather than requesting that your instructor bring you a tasty beverage.

Ways of Speaking

In everyday communication, the form of language selected to express thoughts and emotions carries important relational messages. The form of language used also enables people to properly frame an interaction. When talking with friends, your language is probably informal and simple. When talking with your instructor or with a boss, your language is probably formal and bit more complex.

Forms of language can generally be categorized as either *high code* or *low code* (Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973). **High code** is a formal, grammatical, and very correct way of talking. **Low code** is an informal and often ungrammatical way of talking. Consider the difference between saying “My state of famishment is of such a proportion that I would gladly consume the complete corporeality of a member of the species *Equus caballus przewalskii*” and “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.” The first statement is written in high code, and the second is written in low code.

When interacting with someone in a close relationship and when feeling relaxed, people are more likely to use low code. High code is more likely to be used when speaking to someone with whom a person is unfamiliar or someone with greater power or higher social rank. It is also more likely to be used when a person is uncomfortable or views the interaction as formal. Knowing these differences in codes will enable you to understand the frames that you or others may be using when communicating and how the participants and the situation are being perceived.

high code: a formal, grammatical, and very correct—often “official”—way of talking

low code: an informal and often ungrammatical way of talking

By the way...



Git 'er done!

Linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure (Komatsu, 1993) draw a distinction between *langue* (pronounced “longg”) and *parole* (pronounced “pa-rull”). **Langue** is the formal grammatical structure of language

that you read about in books on grammar.

Parole is how people actually use language, with informal and ungrammatical phrases that carry meaning all the same. “Git ‘er done!” is an example of parole but would earn you bad grades in an English grammar course (*langue*).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Why do you suppose people write one way and speak to people a different way?
2. Why do English courses not teach both ways?

langue: the formal grammatical structure of language (contrast with *parole*)

parole: how people actually use language: where they often speak using informal and ungrammatical language structure that carries meaning to us all the same (contrast with *langue*)

accommodation: when people change their accent, their rate of speech, and even the words they use to indicate a relational connection with the person to whom they are talking

convergence: a person moves toward the style of talk used by the other speaker (contrast with *divergence*)

divergence: a person moves away from another’s style of speech to make a relational point, such as establishing dislike or superiority (contrast with *convergence*)

Accommodation: Adjusting Relational Frames

Frames can be adjusted during an interaction. People choose particular ways of interacting and can change them just the same, adjusting the interaction to fit another person or as a result of changes in feelings or in the relationship that occurs during the course of the interaction.

Giles and his colleagues (Giles, Linz, Bonilla, & Gomez, 2012; Giles, Taylor, & Bourhis, 1973) have shown that people will change the words they use as well as nonverbal communication (discussed in the next chapter) to indicate a relational connection with the person to whom they are talking. They called this process **accommodation** and identified two types: convergence and divergence.

In **convergence**, a person moves toward the style of talk used by the other speaker. For example, an adult converges when he or she uses baby talk to communicate with a child, or a brownnosing employee converges when he or she uses the boss’s company lingo style of talk.

In **divergence**, a person moves away from another’s style of speech to make a relational point, such as establishing dislike or superiority. A good example is how computer geeks and car mechanics insist on using a lot of technical language with customers, instead of giving simple explanations that the nonexpert could understand. This form of divergence keeps the customer in a lower relational place.

Verbal Communication Is Presentational

Verbal communication, as with all symbolic activity, can be both representational and presentational. It is representational in that it can be used to name things and convey information. Accordingly, the word *cat* is used to represent that animal to others. You do not

have to draw a picture, bring a live cat, or act out its behaviors on your hands and knees. If you think about it, even though it is generally taken for granted, the representational nature of verbal communication and the development of symbol using by humans is incredible.

Perhaps less obvious but equally powerful is the presentational nature of verbal communication. The use of verbal communication also provides information about the perspective and worldview of the person sending a message. Your selection of words when describing a scene, persuading someone, discussing another person, or simply talking about the weather is meaningful and conveys your worldview to others. All verbal communication is presentational, but when people tell stories and provide accounts, its presentational nature is particularly recognizable.

Telling Stories

Much of everyday life is spent telling stories about yourself and other people. Suggesting that storytelling is one of the most important human tendencies, Fisher (1985) coined the term *Homo narrans* (Latin for “the person as a storyteller or narrator”).

A **narrative** is any organized story, report, or prepared talk that has a plot, an argument, or a theme, or can be interpreted as having one. The term *narrative* covers what is involved when you say *what* people are doing and *why* they are doing it. This applies whether talk includes funny events, tragic events, significant emotional

experiences, relational stories (meeting new people, falling in love, arguing, making up, and breaking up), or describing one's day.

Narratives are particularly presentational, because speakers do not just relate facts but also arrange the story in a way that provides their perspective. Quite often, stories are told in a way that makes the speaker appear favorable.

Giving Accounts

Although narratives appear on the surface just to report (represent) events, they frequently account for (present) the behaviors. **Accounts** are forms of communication that offer *justifications* ("I was so mad"), *excuses* ("I was really tired"), *exonerations* ("It wasn't my fault"), *explanations* ("And that's how we fell in love"), *accusations* ("But he started it"), and *apologies* ("I'm an idiot"). Accounts "go beyond the facts."

Giving an account involves telling a story that justifies, blames someone for, or calls for someone to account for what happened (Scott & Lyman, 1968). The facts reported in accounts are actually quite presentational. Indeed, the description of something contains spin that explains the facts being reported. For example, your friend may say, "I just failed a math test. It was way too hard." Both statements appear to be facts. One is actually an explanation for why your friend failed (the test was too hard). It is also a presentational account—a personal view about the reason for the failure (the test was too hard).

Listen with fresh ears to everyday conversation, and you will start to hear accounts much more often. Think about their structure and what it tells you about the relationship shared by the person providing the account and the person receiving the account. For example, you do not bother to justify yourself to people whose opinions you do not care about. Also, you would not justify yourself to an enemy in the same way you would to a friend. You expect the friend to know more about your background and to cut you some slack. Relationships impact whether accounts are given and how they are structured.

Kenneth Burke's Pentad

The presentational nature of verbal communication is a fundamental component of everyday communication and personal relationships. Therefore, it stands to reason that being able to analyze the presentational aspects of communication and narratives you encounter would be beneficial.

Kenneth Burke's **pentad** is composed of five elements that explain the motivation of symbolic action. Essentially, Burke was interested in determining the reasons why people used the words that they did. Burke correctly recognized that the use of words results in meanings beyond their denotative meanings or connotative meanings. The very act of using words is meaningful. The key to fully understanding communication is understanding the motives of the people communicating. The selection of words provides clues to understanding motives and provides insight into the perceptions of symbols used.



People tell stories every day, whether about the crazy commute that made them late to work or a funny interaction with a bank teller. How do you know that one of the people in this photo is telling a story, and what role does storytelling seem to play in their relationship?

ETHICAL ISSUE

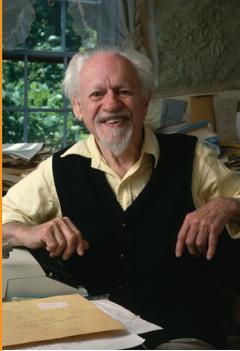
Should the stories you tell always be true? Why or why not?

narrative: any organized story, report, or talk that has a plot, an argument, or a theme and in which speakers both relate facts and arrange the story in a way that provides an account, an explanation, or a conclusion

accounts: forms of communication that go beyond the facts and offer justifications, excuses, exonerations, explanations, or accusations

pentad: five components of narratives that explain the motivation of symbolic action

By the way...



Would You Believe Six Fingers?

After originally developing the pentad, Kenneth Burke (1969) would sometimes include a sixth element: *attitude*. Describing this term, he noted

that building something with a hammer would involve an instrument, or *agency*. Building something with diligence would involve an *attitude*. So, the pentad may actually be a hexad.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What are some examples of narratives and accounts focused on attitude?
2. Although not stated, what might have been the attitude accompanying agency in the example from Table 4.4?

Elements of the Pentad

There are five elements of the pentad, a name conveniently and not coincidentally derived from the Greek word for “five.” In Table 4.4, you will find the names of these elements and what they involve. You will also see how the following event might be categorized: *Following an argument and as soon as she got home, Jessie sent Casey a text message stating she wanted to end their relationship.*

As you consider the terms of the pentad, notice that they are all elements that make up a good story or narrative. It is a good bet that within any story, each one of these elements will be included. However, not all of them will be given the same amount of attention or provided the same emphasis.

The element or elements emphasized in a story provide information about the speaker’s motivation and how he or she wants others to understand the situation. Stories are not simply narrations of events but personalized ways of telling. When a person highlights certain elements of the pentad and not others, he or she is presenting his or her view of the world.

We can use your academically challenged friend from a previous example to illustrate what we mean. Suppose your friend says the following after doing poorly on an examination: “That room was so cold, it was difficult to concentrate on the test.” In this example, the *scene* is being emphasized as the important element of the story. Your friend is not taking responsibility as an *agent*, instead blaming the location of the act.

Table 4.4 Elements of the Pentad

Act	What happened	Jessie ended her relationship with Casey
Scene	Situation or location of the act	Immediately following an argument; Jessie’s home
Agent	Who performed the act	Jessie
Agency	How the act was accomplished	Through sending a text message
Purpose	Why the act took place	To end a relationship

Ratios of the Pentad

The elements of the pentad can be used and understood individually. However, they are also interconnected. Burke (1969) likened them to five fingers on a hand, separate and yet interrelated and used together.

Narratives and accounts may use more than one element of the pentad when framing outcomes or situations as inevitable. When doing so, the outcome or situation seems almost natural, unavoidable, and unquestionable. Table 4.5 provides some ratios for you to consider. Keep in mind that there exist many more. We encourage you to construct your own using the elements of the pentad to better understand them and recognize them in your everyday life.

Table 4.5 Accounting Using Ratios

Agent:Act	<i>Uses a person's character to explain actions</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He's the kind of guy who does that. • Friends don't let friends drive drunk.
Scene:Act	<i>Uses a situation or circumstances to justify action</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desperate times call for desperate measures. • This is war, and harsh methods are needed to obtain the truth from prisoners.
Scene:Agent	<i>Uses a situation to explain the kinds of characters who are found there</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Politics makes strange bedfellows. • Miami, Florida, is a sunny place for shady people.

Functions of Verbal Communication

The use of verbal communication and all symbolic activity is transactive. Things are accomplished beyond the exchange of symbols. On its most basic level, verbal communication enables people to symbolically represent objects, ideas, places, and so on. As mentioned above, using the word *cat* makes things a lot easier than getting down on all fours and acting like a cat. It is also less embarrassing than if you had to go so far as to start licking your leg, coughing up a hairball, and shedding. Video of that behavior would have a nonstop ticket to YouTube!

Verbal communication does more than just represent, though. It presents the worldviews of others, as just discussed. It is used to influence other people. It also creates meanings, realities, relationships, identities, and cultures. We mentioned in Chapter 1 that the stuff of life is created, transformed, and maintained through verbal communication and other symbolic activity.

These ideas are explored in more detail within later chapters. For now, we want to explore two important functions of verbal communication. First, we will examine the use of verbal communication when influencing others. We will then examine its relational functions.

Influencing Others: Facework and Politeness

As people interact with one another in everyday life, they generally want to be viewed as favorable to others. They want to be accepted and to be viewed with respect. There are also many times throughout the day that they will need to impact the behaviors of others. This impact can be as minor as asking someone to pass the ketchup to as major as asking a huge favor. Influencing how we are viewed by others and influencing the behaviors of others involve facework and politeness.

Skills You Can Use: Telling Stories and Providing Accounts

Kenneth Burke's (1969) pentad can help you analyze the stories and accounts of others. However, it can also be used as you develop your own. Consider when it might be more appropriate to emphasize scene, agent, act, agency, and purpose when sharing particular stories and accounts with others.





By the way...

Nonverbal Facework

Although *face* is used as a metaphor, it is worth noticing how often people who are embarrassed or who feel foolish cover their faces with their hands. It is an almost automatic reaction to shame or to the recognition that they have done something foolish.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. We talk about nonverbal communication in the next chapter, but how do you think nonverbal communication is used with facework?
2. Which do you think is more important in facework, verbal communication or nonverbal communication?

Facework

Cupach and Metts (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Metts, 2000) use the term **facework** when referring to the management of people's face, meaning dignity, respect, and acceptance. In most cases, people want to be viewed in a positive manner by others, and those others may include anyone with whom an encounter is shared. Accordingly, people desire positive face regardless of whether interacting with a close friend or with classmates, colleagues, instructors, employees at a store, or even strangers on the street. For instance, people tend to get angry when ignored by store employees while shopping. The anger likely comes not just from having one's time wasted but also from not feeling respected. At the same time, store employees may not feel respected when being yelled at by a customer.

Face Wants

People have positive face wants and negative face wants. **Positive face wants** refer to the need to be seen and accepted as a worthwhile and reasonable person. Positive face wants are dealt with and satisfied quite frequently through verbal communication. For instance, you often hear people pay compliments like "You are doing a great job" or "How very nice of you."

Negative face wants refer to the desire not to be imposed upon or treated as inferior. The management of this last type of face want is perhaps the most familiar. For example, you may hear people say things like "I don't mean to trouble you, but would you . . ." or "Sorry to be a nuisance, but . . ." Our personal favorite from students, "I have a *quick* question," implies that it will not be a lot of trouble or a big imposition to answer it.

Face concerns are evident in everyday communication among those sharing a relationship (see Charee, Romo, & Dailey, 2013). Use of either type of face allows you to manage your relationships by paying attention to the ways people need to be seen in the social world. The behaviors are therefore a subtle kind of relational management done in talk.

ETHICAL ISSUE

Should you always be polite and save people's face when they do something embarrassing?

facework: the management of people's dignity or self-respect, known as "face"

positive face wants: the need to be seen and accepted as a worthwhile and reasonable person (contrast with *negative face wants*)

negative face wants: the desire not to be imposed upon or treated as inferior (contrast with *positive face wants*)

Maintaining Positive Face

Sociologist Erving Goffman (1971) promoted the notion that *face* is something managed by people in social interactions. People cooperate to maintain positive face for one another and to avoid negative face for one another.

An example of helping others to maintain a positive face and avoid a negative face may occur when they make a mistake or do something embarrassing. In such cases, people trivialize an embarrassing mistake by saying "Oh, don't worry about it" or "I do that all the time." In effect, they are saying that they do not see the other person's behavior truly as an indication of who he or she really is. They are trying to let him or her off the hook as a person and are distinguishing his or her momentary actions from his or her self as a socially appropriate being.

Politeness Theory

As mentioned above, people must impact the behaviors of others throughout daily life. When this is done, there is a chance that positive face can be diminished and negative face can be imposed. Linguists Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson (1978) developed a theory of politeness to describe the ways that people deal with these possibilities.

While there is a chance that face will be threatened, not all face-threatening acts are equal. When determining the size of the face threat, the following three things must be considered: (a) the relationship shared by the interactants, (b) the power difference of the interactants, and (c) the size of the imposition. Some relationships are more likely than others to make impositions appropriate. For instance, asking a friend to help you move is more acceptable than asking an acquaintance. Differences in power may make impositions more appropriate. For instance, a boss asking an employee to move a box would be more acceptable than a coworker of the same standing asking another coworker to do the same thing. The sizes of impositions also differ. Asking someone to open a window is less of an imposition than asking someone to give you a ride to the airport.

Determining the size of the face-threatening act assists people when determining the best way to impact someone else's behavior. Table 4.6 offers various politeness strategies for you to consider.

Relationships and Everyday Talk

Another important function of verbal communication is its use in the development and maintenance of relationships. Duck and Pond (1989), apart from being our favorite combination of author names, came up with some ideas about the way relationships connect with talk in everyday life. They pointed out that talk can serve the following three functions for relationships: (a) instrumental, (b) indexical, and (c) essential.

ANALYZING EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION

Look at What I Can Do



Think about a situation where you overheard two people talking and you could tell—you just *knew*—that they were not close but that one of them was trying to impress the other and get into a relationship with him or her.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What did you notice that made you sure you were right about the person doing the “impressing”?
2. How did you know whether or not the other person was impressed?

Table 4.6 Politeness Strategies

Bald on Record	<i>Act directly without concern for face needs. Likely used when an imposition is small or appropriate given relationship of interactants.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I need you to help me move next weekend. • I need you to give me a ride to the airport.
Positive Politeness	<i>Focus on positive face of the person, often through flattery or offering something in return.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are so strong. Could you help me move next weekend? • If you would give me a ride to the airport, I would fill your car up with gas.
Negative Politeness	<i>Acknowledge possibility of negative face, offering regrets or being pessimistic.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is a lot to ask, but would you mind helping me move next weekend? • I don't suppose you would be able to give me a ride to the airport?
Off Record	<i>Hint or present the request in a vague manner.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I sure could use some help moving next weekend. • I don't know how I am going to get to the airport.
Avoidance	<i>Sometimes the face-threatening act is so large, it is avoided entirely.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lift with your knees. • Start walking.



Talk in friendships or relationships can be described in terms of three functions: instrumental, indexical, and essential. Which function of talk would you use to describe the two men in this photo?

instrumental function of talk: when what is said brings about a goal that you have in mind for the relationship, and talk is the means or instrument by which it is accomplished (e.g., asking someone on a date or to come with you to a party)

indexical function of talk: demonstrates or indicates the nature of the relationship between speakers

essential function of talk: a function of talk that makes the relationship real and talks it into being, often by using coupling references or making assumptions that the relationship exists

Instrumental Function

The **instrumental function of talk** occurs when what is said results in the accomplishment of a goal in the relationship. The instrumental function of talk in relationships is illustrated whenever you ask someone out for a date, to a party, to meet you for coffee, to be your friend, or to be just a little bit more sensitive and caring. What you say reveals a goal that you have in mind for the relationship, and talk is the means or instrument by which you reveal it. Anything you say that serves the purpose of bringing something new to or changing anything about the relationship is an instrumental function of talk in relationships.

Indexical Function

The **indexical function of talk** demonstrates or indicates the nature of the relationship between speakers. You index your relationship in *what* you say to someone and the *way* that you say it (nonverbal). If you say in a sharp tone “Come into my office; I want to see you!” you are not only being discourteous, but you are indicating that you are superior to the other person and have the relational right to order him or her around. If you say in a pleasant tone “Would you happen to have a free moment? I would appreciate it if we could meet in my office,” you are indicating respect for the other person and indicating relational equality. The content and relational elements of the talk occur together. In your talk with other people, you constantly weave in clues about your relationships. The fact that you would say some things to some people and avoid saying those things to other people exhibits different relationships.

Essential Function

The **essential function of talk** happens when talk makes a relationship real or brings it into being. The essential function of talk often occurs through the use of coupling references or making assumptions that the relationship exists. People very easily underestimate the extent to which talk and its nonverbal wrapping *are* a relationship.

Verbal communication creates and embodies relationships both directly and indirectly. Direct talk would be such statements as “You’re my friend” and “I love you.” Indirect talk, which recognizes the relationship’s existence but does not mention it explicitly, would include such questions or statements as “What shall we do this weekend?” and “Let’s do something really special tonight.” The essential function of talk operates in less obvious ways as well. Examples of these less obvious forms of talk include frequent references to *we* and *us* along with the use of nicknames.

Of course, when two people are in a relationship, they do not spend every moment with each other. You experience absences, breaks, and separations in your relationships. These may be relatively short (one person goes shopping), longer (a child goes to school for the day), or extended (two lovers get jobs in different parts of the country).

Because these breaks occur, there are ways to indicate that, although the interaction may be over, the relationship itself continues. For example, you might say “See you next week,” “Talk to you later,” or “In the next chapter we will be discussing nonverbal communication.”

»»» Focus Questions Revisited

1 How is verbal communication symbolic?

Verbal communication is the use of language. Words are symbolic representations.

2 How does verbal communication involve meaning?

Words have denotative meaning and connotative meaning. Denotative meaning is the general meaning of a word. Connotative meaning refers to the overtones and implications associated with a word or an object. Words are also given particular value in a society.

3 How is verbal communication relational?

Verbal communication influences relationships, and relationships influence verbal communication. Whenever you communicate verbally, a particular relationship is presumed with another person, the members of a group, or an audience. Another way of thinking about this is that when you are verbally communicating, you are also relating.

4 How is verbal communication cultural?

Verbal communication is cultural, much in the way that it is relational. Verbal communication influences culture, and culture influences verbal communication. Whenever you communicate verbally, cultural assumptions are

presumed involving appropriateness and meanings within a given society or group.

5 What frames your understanding of verbal communication?

Frames used to understand communication can involve relationships, cultures, settings, and other factors influencing communication. These frames can be recognized and established through the form of language. They can also be adjusted during the course of a conversation.

6 What is the presentational nature of verbal communication?

The selection of words when speaking is meaningful and provides information about the perspective and worldview of the person sending a message. All verbal communication is presentational, but when people tell stories and provide accounts, its presentational nature is particularly recognizable.

7 What are the functions of verbal communication?

Verbal communication is used to represent other things. In doing so, verbal communication also provides information about the worldview of others. It is used to influence other people. It also creates meanings, realities, relationships, identities, and cultures.

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»»» Questions to Ask Your Friends

1. Try conducting a conversation with one of your friends where you use only high code. Afterward, ask your friend how long it took to notice something wrong or inappropriate in the situation.
2. Ask your friends if they ever find it hard to know when you are kidding and what makes it hard.
3. Have your friends report an occasion when they caught someone in a bold-faced lie and how they knew. How did they handle it, based on what you know about facework?

»»» Media Connections

1. Find news stories that are structured in ways that illustrate the pentad.
2. Language used on social networking sites and when making comments online tends to be more argumentative than that which is used elsewhere. Collect examples of argumentative language use online and consider why such language use is more prevalent online.
3. What techniques do news anchors use on television in order to relate with their audience and seem friendly, likeable, and credible?

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Chapter Outline

What Is Nonverbal Communication?

- Symbolic
- Decoding and Encoding
- Dynamic and Static
- Guided by Rules
- Cultural
- Personal
- Ambiguous
- Less Controlled
- Continuous

The Functions of Nonverbal Communication

- Interconnects With Verbal Communication
- Regulates Interactions
- Identifies Others

- Transmits Emotional Information
- Relational Meaning and Understanding

Types of Nonverbal Communication

- Proxemics
- Territoriality
- Kinesics
- Eye Contact and Gaze
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- Chronemics
- Haptics

Focus Questions Revisited

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